

## On the possible former breeding of the Red-footed Falcon *Falco vespertinus* in northwest Africa

by Michael Walters

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In the egg collection of the British Museum (Natural History) there are 2 sets of eggs said to be of *Falco vespertinus* collected in Algeria in the middle of the nineteenth century. The species occurs in northwest Africa mainly on spring migration, but has not been known to breed there in recent years. There is no reference to present or former breeding in Algeria by Peters (1931), Witherby *et al.* (1940), Voous (1960), Vaurie (1965), Etchecopar & Hue (1967), Mayr & Cottrell (1979) or Cramp & Simmons (1980). The only person to have recorded it appears to be Loche (1867) who is quoted here in full, his book not being readily accessible:

“Assez répandu en Algérie, cet Oiseau s’y rencontre par petites troupes de cinq à six individus, il recherche de préférence les endroits marécageux, le voisinage des lacs et des étangs et le littoral de la mer; sa nourriture principale consiste en Insectes coléoptères, et an Sauterelles fort communes en Algérie et qu’il est très-habile à saisir.

L’Erythrope Kobez se reproduit en Algérie dans les joncs et les broussailles qui avoisinent les lacs; sa ponte est de quatre oeufs assez gros, un peu courts, . . .”

This implies that the bird nests on the ground, which is not usual but is known to occur (Dementiev & Gladkov 1951). Heim de Balsac & Mayaud (1962) draw attention to Loche’s account, admit that his description of the eggs appears to be correct, but nevertheless dismiss the record as unlikely, without giving a reason for their decision.

The eggs were received from the Tristram Collection and represent 2 of 3 clutches formerly owned by him. The present whereabouts of the other clutch is not known. The details of these 3 clutches as given on p. 37 of Tristram’s MS. Catalogue (now in the British Museum (Natural History) at Tring), are as follows:—

W.a. From a nest of three [eggs] in the forest south of Lac Halloula. 4 July 1857.

W.k. From a nest of four in the neighbourhood of Air Oosera. Lac [illegible] in June 1856.

37.43 Near Air Oosera, 1860. Taken by Capt. Loche.

The sets in the Museum are the second and third listed above. No. W.k., consists of 2 eggs which have been registered BM(NH) Nos. 1901.2.25.79 and 1901.2.25.560. These are stated in the Museum’s records to have been taken by Captain Loche, but Tristram implies that he took them himself. They measure 39.1 × 31.5 and 38.9 × 30.2 mm. The second set, No. 37.43, consists of 3 eggs, registered 1901.2.25.557–9, which measure 40.15 × 30.8; 37.2 × 31.2; and 35.6 × 31.7 mm. All these measurements fall within the range given by Schönwetter (1961) for *Falco vespertinus*, but also within the range for *F. tinnunculus* and several other small species

of *Falco*, the eggs of which are very variable and not distinguishable with certainty. Little can be deduced as to the Tristram eggs' identity based on their appearance, save that there is no reason to suppose that they are incorrectly identified.

There are 4 skins of *F. vespertinus* in the BM(NH) collection from northwest Africa. These are as follows:—

1872.11.4.54 adult ♂. Tangier, June 1871. Collected by Howard Saunders.

1897.11.10.266 adult ♂. Tangier, June 1871. Collected by Howard Saunders.

1847.10.21.32 immature ♂. Tunis, no date. Collector not known, received from Louis Fraser.

1936.6.N.20.1531 immature, stated to be ♂. Algeria, no date. Verreaux Collection. Appears to be a juvenile.

*F. vespertinus* has an unusual migration pattern, occurring in northwest Africa only on spring migration. The autumn passage from the normal breeding range in eastern Europe and western Asia is south over the eastern Mediterranean and the Black and Caspian Seas (Cramp & Simmons 1980). The spring migration begins in early March; a minority regularly pass through west Africa, in April, and cross the Mediterranean from mid-April to mid-May. Eggs are normally laid in late May and early June (Witherby *et al.* 1940), mid-April to end of May (Cramp & Simmons 1980), so that the egg dates for the Algerian specimens are certainly late. The 2 skins collected by Saunders in June, long after the migration should have passed through, may suggest breeding birds.

It seems possible, therefore, that *Falco vespertinus* bred formerly in Algeria, though the present evidence is inconclusive.

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